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ABSTRACT

The reason for studying the characteristics of a healthy family is to encourage and strengthen the family and to move toward an enriched family life by using the characteristics as bench marks. Six characteristics are discussed as the essence of a healthy family: (1) commitment; (2) togetherness; (3) appreciation; (4) good communication; (5) spiritual well-being; and (6) coping with crisis and stress. The commitment section focuses on the survival of the family through the different roles in the family coordinating, working together, and being supportive of each other. The togetherness section presents the importance of families arranging family time together. The appreciation section examines the need of individuals to be appreciated and admired by others. The next section describes how good communication creates a sense of belonging, reduces frustration, and enhances marital relations. The spiritual well-being section indicates that healthy families stress spirituality and work toward a common mission. The final section on coping with crisis and stress delineates 10 common coping strategies utilized by healthy families and suggests the importance of a family's willingness to change and make changes. Contains 18 references. (CK)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY FAMILY

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Article 2

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY FAMILY *

Phylis Lan Lin

Introduction

The search for self-actualization and self-fulfillment has become one of the cultural mainstreams in modern societies. This has had profound influence on the quality of individual growth, family life, and community mental health. In addition, contemporary families have been affected by significant social, economic, and moral changes. We have evidenced increasing divorce rates, heartbreaking parent-child conflicts and worsening problems of juvenile delinquency. Many social researchers have wished to delineate a typology of an ideal family and to identify the image of a healthy family. In other words, recent studies have switched the focus from identifying the characteristics of a dysfunctional and broken family to identifying the characteristics of a healthy and happy family. The reason for studying the characteristics of a healthy family is to encourage and strengthen the family to move toward an enriched family life by using these characteristics as bench marks. In today's changing society, most families need to put forth extra efforts in order to just survive.

There are many words that have been used to describe the characteristics of a healthy family. "Family strengths" has been used to describe the family resource of adaptability and integration, which denotes a happy, successful and stable family. "Happy family" refers to a healthy, comfortable, intimate, harmonious, warm and well-balanced family life. These two labels may be used interchangeably. "Healthy" is not limited to the narrow medical definition. Instead, it encompasses a much broader meaning regarding the harmonious relations and successful functioning so that both the individual and the family's needs can be met. Every family has problems, including healthy families. Those families who are able to cope and adjust well in daily life demands are termed

* See also Lin, P.L. (1994). Characteristic of a healthy family. In P. L. Lin, K. W. Mei, & H. C. Peng (Eds.), Marriage and the family in Chinese societies: Selected Readings (pp. 9-22). Indianapolis, IN: University of Indianapolis Press.

"healthy families." Therefore, the definition of a healthy family is not based solely on the structure of the family, hence, even a single parent family can be considered a healthy family as long as that family's needs are met and stresses are managed through positive mechanisms. A healthy family is a stress effective family in that such a family is able to function at its fullest capacity, and is able to cope with daily life demands (Chen & Lin, 1991; Curran, 1983; Lin, 1987a, 1987b, 1992, 1993; Lin & Chen, 1987; Lin et al., 1992).

In the introduction to *Building Family Strengths: Blueprints for Action*, Nick Stinnett defined family strengths as "those relationship patterns, interpersonal skills and competencies, and social and psychological characteristics which create a sense of positive family identity, promote satisfying and fulfilling interacting among family members, encourage the development of the potential of the family's stability to deal effectively with stress and crises" (Stinnett et al., 1979, p. 2). Therefore, "healthy family" is not only a concept, but can be operationalized, observed and measured; i.e., the positive dynamic human relations within a family (namely, characteristics of a healthy family) can be studied empirically. This concept focuses more on the interactions between and among family members than on the structure of the family.

A hundred years ago, Leo Tolstoy said, "Every happy family has similar characteristics; but all the unhappy families have their own reasons" (Lin, 1987b). If this is so, what is the image of a healthy family? A few years ago, Professor Jeawmei Chen of the National Cheng-chi University in Taiwan and I studied over 600 college students in Taiwan and the United States on the perception of a healthy family (Lin & Chen, 1987). Our findings supported the studies of Curren (1985), Stinnett (1985) and others.

The following section will integrate the findings of these studies, using the six characteristics of a healthy family as identified by Stinnett (1985) as the headings for further discussion on the essence of a healthy family.

Commitment

A family is like an organism, with life and vitality. It is made of many interdependent parts. For the family to survive, those interdependent parts (different roles in the family) must work, coordinate, and be supportive of each other. Building a family is not an easy chore. In addition to family

members' mutual support and cooperation, it is most important that family members have commitments to each other. They must put family life ahead of every thing else (1)*, including sacrificing individual hobbies, reducing work hours, etc. in order to maintain family wellness. Self is a miniature of the family. The Chinese denotes this spirit of self-sacrifice for the fulfillment of the family as "sacrificing small self for the big self" (2). In a healthy family, members agree on family goals, and are willing to work toward these short- or long-term goals. It is most important that family members understand the meaning of those goals and how they might affect their family life.

The family is the smallest unit of a social organization. It must respond to the demands from within and from the outside environment. Through family members' mutual commitment to each other, a solid foundation can be built. A healthy family's goals are set with flexibility and room for modification. When family members have opportunities to participate in goal-setting and the implementation of family goals, those family members are interacting, coordinating and working together as a team. A long-term mutual support by team members is a special kind of commitment. Every successful family must make certain investments in time, energy, and compassion in each other. There is another type of investment called commitment which simply says that marriage and the family receive top priority.

Healthy families focus on the long-term perspective. "Without a long-term perspective on marriage and family, we simply cannot endure or sustain the inevitable rigors, struggles, and challenges. With a long-term perspective, where there is a will, there is a way" (Covy, 1994, pp. 130-131). It takes a strong and lifetime commitment to develop a long-term perspective. After all, presumably, family relationships are lifelong relationships. Commitment also implies the transmission of family heritage and abiding by family rules and regulations. In a healthy family, members are proud of their family heritage and lineage.

In a healthy family, commitment and fidelity are closely related. The couple mutually respects and trusts each other, and is honest with each other. Trust and commitment are inseparable. If the trust is low, communication between

*See Chinese characters at end of article.

family members is exhausting, ineffective, difficult, and the passage of the message becomes meaningless and in vain. In the occurrence of an extramarital affair, the individual demonstrates his or her lack of commitment to his or her marriage and family. It permits a threat to the couple's intimate relations. An extramarital affair is a threat to the spouse's self esteem and dignity. It implies that the spouse can be replaced. In a happy marriage, both spouses see the other as "indispensable."

Togetherness

Professor Stinnett asked 1,500 children, "What is a happy family?" They did not list money, car, or big house. What they really looked for was the family spending time together in such activities as: playing games, taking family vacations, and celebrating birthdays together. This finding is in accord with a study of elementary students in Taipei, Taiwan, who also emphasized how much they are longing for family togetherness.

Regardless of how busy its members are, a healthy family learns to control time and is not controlled by time. Most importantly, they know how to arrange family time together. Family togetherness does not take place incidentally. It must be planned to allow it to happen. Activities such as attending church, community potluck lunches, cooking, cleaning yards, family trips, game playing, or shopping are frequently shared by healthy families. What is important is not what you do, but doing it together.

Recently, Lucy Alexander of the Family Wellness Center at Tunghai University in Taiwan designed the APPRECIATION GAME. The game not only creates happy times, but also, through playing together, family members are able to interact in a nonthreatening atmosphere. Through playing together, family members are able to share their values, thoughts, needs and appreciation. Family games are becoming a very popular pastime in Taiwan. I am intrigued by observing families as they play the game, recognizing their attachment to each other, and revealing more and more of themselves. They break through the traditional Chinese authoritarian parent-child relations in a relaxed and "democratic" environment. Since playing games is not a part of the traditional Chinese family pastime, family members actually have to make an effort and a commitment to engage in this

activity. Those families who have played this game have benefited by a commitment to each other in time, and sharing of needs and expectations, hopes and dreams. Commitment of self and expectation of others are two sides of the same coin. In a healthy family, members are seen as a unit, as a "coin." For, only through commitment and being together, can unity be brought about.

Healthy families provide their members emotional support and a sense of security. "Security represents our sense of worth, identity, emotional anchorage, self-esteem, and personal strength" (Covy, 1992, p. 22). When family members are all together, the individual's loneliness is reduced to its lowest level.

Meal times are one of the best times for family gathering. Especially around the Chinese round table that symbolizes balance, harmony, and allows equal communication. Meal time not only allows family members to pour out their life experience of the day, it also provides a good time for family socialization. A lot of family life education takes place during meal times. Today many families exploit this hour for family togetherness by having meals while watching television, focusing their attention on the TV programs instead of interacting with family members. Not long ago in Taiwan there was a "Daddy, come home for dinner!" campaign, broadcast on TV to promote the whole idea of family togetherness.

Family-time provides a good opportunity to observe family dynamics. In some families, meal time looks like "wartime," with fussing and attacking each other. In other families there is peace with expression of mutual affection and caring. Meal times quite often reflect family traditions, such as respect for the elderly, good manners, and orderliness. In Japanese families, before meals they would say "Itadakimas"—please start your meal with appreciation for the service. In a healthy family, meal times are usually good times. In religious families, prayers before meals express mutual appreciation as well as appreciation to the Creator. Healthy families use meal time as a time for family togetherness and also to show appreciation to the providers, i.e., God, the meal preparer, and the bread earners.

One of the foundations for a happy family is that family members admire and appreciate each other. Today, both parents and children are busy doing their own things. It seems

that everybody is always in a hurry. We don't take time to really sit down and have a good meal with family members and have good conversations.

How about the quality of time together? Healthy families know that their time together must be of high quality. However, providing adequate time together is important. It is hard to imagine providing a high quality of interaction in less than ten minutes of togetherness. This argument of quality versus quantity of time together has brought some ambiguities particularly to working parents. In the case of single-parent, working mother, dual career, and commuter families, parents are hard put to have adequate time for themselves or for their children. Spending time together with the family really takes extra commitment to make it happen. There is always a debate of whether quantity and quality are equated. We are sure that insufficient time makes it difficult to provide quality time. However, many parents make high commitment to their children even though they spend very little physical time together. Yet they appear to have a high degree of cohesiveness. For example, a very busy working mother tells her children, "In case of emergency, make sure to drag me out of my meeting, whether it is an important meeting or not. I will be right back because you are more important than my job." With this kind of reassurance to her children, the quantity time has been compensated. In the case that frequent face-to-face interaction with family members is impossible, for instance, in a commuting marriage, commitment is crucial for family solidarity.

Appreciation

One of the basic human needs is to be appreciated and admired by other human beings. Studies show that there is a high degree of mutual admiration and appreciation between members of healthy families. When parents kiss their children good night, it says to their child, "You have been a good kid and we love you very much." This statement at bedtime is one of the best reassurances to the child of affirmation of their good behavior during the day. It is also a very subtle way for parents to express to the young child, "My goodness, thank God, you have been such a good kid." In the traditional, relatively authoritarian Chinese family, it is very unusual for parents to express their appreciation to children.

Chinese parents, by and large, have high expectations of their children's academic achievements. When their children reach parents' expectation, many parents keep their joy and contentment inside and seldom express directly their pride and "appreciation" to their children. Children want to be appreciated too! It is even more so when children feel, "Ma and Pa, I am doing this for you!"

Chinese people are relatively reserved in expressing appreciation, and showing mutual affection in public is almost a taboo. Recently a number of Couple Growth workshops were introduced through family life education programs in Taiwan. Many participants responded that through this experiential training they realized that "Appreciation is the best lubricant for marriage" and "One can bring happiness through the spouses' strength." Therefore, a happy couple would frequently say to each other, "I appreciate your hard work."

Good Communication

Good communication creates a sense of belonging, reduces frustration, and enhances marital relations. One must deliberately practice good communication, including becoming a good listener. It takes practice. This is one of the most important units in family life education.

In a healthy family, communication avoids redundancy. If the same message has to be repeated, they try to use different phrases and words. Concentrating on listening to the other is an important self-discipline. In an unhealthy family, bad communication quite often has been equated with "tossing pearls before swine" or as in Chinese saying, "playing the piano to a cow," (3) or "go in the right ear and out the left ear" (4).

This means that the listener is not paying attention to the speaker. The first step to becoming a good listener is to show respect and attentiveness to the speaker.

It doesn't mean a healthy family does not have conflict, argument or rivalry. The difference between a healthy and unhealthy family is that a healthy family's solution to conflict is not to push the other into a corner. They would use creative or constructive solutions to their conflict. They do not attack, but focus on a solution. Good communication is problem solving not conflict creating.

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A sense of humor is important to good communication. It brings a relaxed atmosphere. It releases tension in conflict. When a family enjoys humor together, it reflects the family's harmonious rapport and encourages a democratic spirit. A family's communication style reflects the power structure in the family.

A healthy family stresses egalitarian relations between husband and wife. When we ask a child, "who is the boss?," the child will reply, "sometimes my father makes decision; sometimes my mother does." In a healthy family, we tend to find the division of labor at home is more equal and the decision-making process is more rational and considerate. In some harmonious traditional families, we find the father is obviously the head of the household. However, if we do a more careful observation, it will not be too difficult to find that although the wife or the mother is not the commander, she, nevertheless, exercises her influence in a subtle way. In a healthy family, the husband respects the wife, accepts her opinion. This has been evident in many traditional Chinese families, where father is the authority figure, but mother has her influence as well. There is a saying, "In the traditional Chinese family, father is on the throne, whereas mother is the power behind the throne." In fact, Chinese women might have more "power" in the family than they thought they had.

Television is the best and the worst enemy. It transforms family life style. It transmits many values to children. A family therapist pointed out humorously that his clients complain that the soap operas and football games are the main reasons for their broken marriage. This couple spends more time with TV than with each other. Not only does TV time affect family relations, but the selection of programs often becomes the focus of family conflicts.

Healthy families avoid becoming slaves to the television. They try to control the time and programs that their family watches. They see the positive function of TV. For example, some parents accompany the young child watching TV and use the program as a topic of conversation. They may ask what the child has learned from the program, and how was the dramatized story related to the real world. TV may become a tool for good communication if used properly.

Good communication does not only deliver the message, but responds to the message. It includes verbal and nonverbal messages. Family members are free to express their emo-

tions and feelings. Although "silent communications" (5) may describe the love and affection in a couple's heart, we must be aware that at times silence may also mean resentment, protest, or anger. In traditional Chinese families the approach is, "Children have ears but no mouth" (6). In other words, children should listen without expressing their opinions. This traditional approach has its own merit. Yet, in dealing with adolescents, it is very important that we should try to understand their feelings through direct expression. Especially for Chinese American parents, open communication with their American born children is very important because they have to break two barriers: culture and generation. In a healthy family, members are allowed to freely express their opinions and not to put down one another. In addition, communication in a healthy family pays attention to clarifying messages. "What you said is not what I heard" (7) is a sign of a communication problem. Feedback between encounters reconfirms the exchange of messages. Therefore, in addition to learning good communication skills, you must also learn good self-communication. Try to understand yourself before you try to understand another. A disciple asked the most popular and well-respected Buddhist Priestess in Taiwan, Priestess Cheng-Yen, "What is communication? How can I communicate? Can people with different backgrounds, habits and levels of education communicate with each other?" She replied, "In reality, it will be easier for people with similar habits, goals, etc. to communicate. However, the individual is very important. One must listen well and not be afraid to express one's own opinion. One should have the wisdom and humility to accept your encounter's ideas. Therefore, do not ask others to communicate with you, instead, ask yourself to communicate with others. If I insist to put my opinion forward, that is not communication—that is persuasion. If I step back a step for you, that is communication" (Buddhist Priestess Cheng-Yen's Meditations, 1990, p. 256).

For those who are married or planning to be married, ask yourself this fundamental question: Do I want to marry myself? This question has several meanings. Before we try to communicate with others, we should first evaluate and know ourselves. In a happy marriage, couples are relatively objective, and can listen and give feedback to the message from the other. They are courteous to each other (8).

Spiritual Well-Being

We know that not all healthy families have religious beliefs. However, studies show that high religiosity and happy family are positively correlated (Stinnett & Defrain, 1994). High religiosity does not mean actively participating in attending church or temple services. It refers to a spiritual aspect of the family life-style. When family members share a common faith, it reassures their mutual support. Religious families tend to be more patient, forgiving, and broadly accepting of each other. Our differences in faith create distance between people. Those couples who share common religious faith (beliefs and activities) tend to have a higher degree of emotional intimacy. Spiritual well-being not only provides family members a common value orientation, but also provides similar life goals, mission and meaning. A recent Gallup poll in America showed that 63% of the surveyed public indicated that religion strengthened their family relations. In the Western society, religion becomes part of the social norm. Religion is a social force which binds people together. Many family traditions are transmitted through religious rituals. Faith promotes family members' mutual dependency and cohesiveness; a common fate ties people together. The traditional Chinese Confucianism is a social and family religion. It binds people together and defines proper social conducts and interpersonal relations in the family through the practice of filial piety (Lin & Lin, 1994). Phrases such as "Do not travel far while parents are still living" (9); "Being a friendly older brother and a respectful younger brother" (10); "Obedience to your parents" (11); "Benevolence is the foundation of human nature and to be human is to be benevolent" (12) illustrate common practices of filial piety in Chinese families. Intimately connected with the practice of filial piety is the "cult of ancestor worship" which ensures the stability of the family. Chai and Chai (1969, p. 84) pointed out that "Ancestor worship, which binds one to all the preceding generations, has been used by Confucianism as one of the means to integrate the kinship group. The secular function of ancestor worship is to cultivate kinship values, such as filial piety, family loyalty, and continuity of the family lineage." The practices of filial piety and ancestor worship are the most significant Confucian teachings that are considered pillars of a healthy family and hence the foundation of a

strong community. These practices and ideas also set the foundation for the family support system which is so important and rooted in enhancing resiliency among Chinese families.

Spiritual well-being does not necessarily mean active participation in religious activities. Volunteer work and any philanthropy, or humanitarian activities are included in the broad definition of spiritual well-being. Healthy families stress spiritual well-being and work toward a common mission. Healthy families know their family mission, know their family values, know what they are all about, and know their reason for being. They are able to put their moral values into action. They are not only concerned about their own family's well-being, but also the welfare of the community where they live.

Coping with Crisis and Stress

The Chinese have a saying: "Every family has complaints" (13). The healthy family is no exception. Healthy families may face many problems as well. The difference is that members of healthy families are able to face the reality and creatively, systematically and rationally cope with the crises together. In certain difficult times, family members must extend each other's mutual trust and interdependence. However, they are able to solve their problems effectively, as Curran (1985) calls a healthy family, the "crisis effective family."

Then what are some of the mechanisms of coping used by healthy families? In addition to effective use of general coping skills for stress (Lin, 1983; McCubbin et al., 1980), the following are some of the common coping strategies healthy families adapt:

1. Make good use of support systems, including seeking help from the extended family system, friends, and community resources. In fact, regardless of the trend toward the nuclear family, the extended family support system is still very functional in Chinese society today.
2. Develop new family rules, such as prioritizing of family budget, taking turns doing family chores, and alternating family roles.
3. Take a resilient and flexible attitude. Everyone in

the family is willing to be "re-socialized" and adapt to a "paradigm shift" when necessary. They are not ashamed of lower standards in household chores. For example, a family put a sign in the kitchen which read, "My house is clean enough to be healthy and dirty enough to be happy."

4. Develop and strengthen good communication skills.
5. Focus on solutions rather than circulating conflicting issues.
6. Reevaluate the congruence between expectations and commitment of both family and marital roles.
7. Recognize that stress is inevitable but surmountable and controllable in daily life.
8. Avoid creating unnecessary stress for oneself or family members.
9. Recognize each other's special needs, especially teenager's developmental needs.
10. In summary, healthy families are able to effectively and efficiently manage a crisis situation. These families are able to discover problems early and are able to develop alternate strategies and very decisively take action to avoid larger crises.

In a healthy family, parents are willing to ask for help from professionals. They are not embarrassed to share their "family ugliness to outsiders" (14). They do not use sarcastic attitudes in analyzing the weakness of the family. Instead, through objectivity, they are able to recognize and evaluate family strengths. The most important characteristic of a healthy family is its willingness to change and make changes. It does not mean healthy families do not have problems. Members of healthy families are able to endure together their hardships in life.

A recent public opinion poll in the United States reaffirms that, in times of economic depression, unemployment or other difficult times, middle income families welcome a real harbor. People are reaffirming the importance of family, whether in the West or in the East. Family, indeed, is the most secure and stable source of strength for those who are facing challenges in the work place. According to Mutual Life's 1980 survey, 42% of those studied believed that "Family is the foundation for transmitting basic values of society."

That percentage has increased to 84% in the 1990 survey. Those 1,200 surveyed, indicated that the family more than the government, schools, employers, or religious institutions, was able to transmit social cultural values. They recognized that only if we have a solid family can we create a solid community. A recent survey in Taiwan showed similar findings. Facing rapid social change and increasing social problems, family values are re-recognized. We must create healthy families. Family lives must be enriched for it is the cornerstone of our nation. This thought is as old as Confucius' Cannon (Lin & Lin, in press).

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Note

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Chinese Characters

1. 家庭至上
2. 犧牲小我，完成大我
3. 對牛彈琴
4. 右耳進，左耳出
5. 無聲勝有聲
6. 小孩有耳無嘴
7. 言者無心聽者有意
8. 相敬如賓
9. 父母在不遠行
10. 兄友弟恭
11. 唯命是從
12. 仁者人也
13. 家家有本難唸的經
14. 家醜不可外揚